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ABSTRACT

This paper is a mid-project report of a study being conducted of a block of education methods courses (i.e., courses on classroom management, content area reading, secondary methods, and the professional educator) for students seeking emergency certification. This block is being taught 80% asynchronously through the Internet and 20% synchronously in a classroom at Sam Houston State University (Texas). The target population is post-baccalaureate students who are employed under emergency certification in secondary school settings. Qualitative analysis techniques were applied to field notes, transcripts of computer-mediated discourse, project evaluations, and interviews with the professors and students. The findings of this study are presented by the administrator (immediate supervisor) and the two professors. The administrator's discussion addresses registration procedures, entrance requirements, online activities, student progress, and concerns about time required of faculty. The professors' comments highlight recruitment, financial aid, technical expertise of students, problems with students accessing the message boards, lesson design, and assessment. (Author/AEF)

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Conducting Education Methods On-Line to Teachers on Emergency Certification

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Abstract: This paper is a mid-project report of a study being conducted of a block of education methods courses for post-baccalaureate students teaching on emergency certification. Qualitative analysis techniques were applied to field notes, transcripts of computer-mediated discourse, project evaluations, and interviews with the professors and students. The professors and an administrator analyzed the data.

Higher education is at an institutional crossroads. Major technological innovation has set in motion far-reaching socioeconomic realignments and presents new challenges for political leaders, business people, rank-and-file citizens and, of course, educators. The exponential growth of broadband networks, e-mail, newsgroups and chat rooms has transformed the nature of human discourse just as profoundly as the printing press did in the Middle Ages. Yet most colleges and universities have been slow to respond to the Information Revolution and an increasingly wired society.

Educational Institutions must respond to these developments and recognize that their primary clients, the students entering colleges and universities, are changing, not only demographically, but also qualitatively. These New Learners tend to be older, and/or employed, raised in environments embedded with "smart products" and technologically literate. These students, in choosing a college or university, will be shopping around in a buyer's market. In order to be successful in a time when the average adult will change professions four times during the course of their working lives, educators must recognize the needs of the changing student population and the benefits of offering a variety of modalities for providing educational services. It is increasingly evident that, in order to survive and prosper in the Information Age, colleges and universities must both *adapt* traditional pedagogical models and *adopt* alternative pedagogical models. Some colleges and universities are beginning to respond to these challenges by updating traditional courses with various educational technologies, and funding, designing and implementing new computer-enhanced curricula.

Distance education -- which utilizes telecommunications to bridge time and space limitations in order to disseminate learning experiences, ideas, and information to produce exchanges between the teacher and class members (Boetcher, 1997) -- offers a flexible alternative. Web-based distance education offers the greatest flexibility in terms of time, distance, and accessibility. More than 40% of U.S. households and 85% of U.S. businesses have computers and, although a lesser percentage of households and businesses are connected to the Internet, the online community is growing exponentially. The number of adult users of the World Wide Web tripled from 2.2 million in 1994 to 6.6 million in 1995. Moreover, between July 1995 and January 1996, the number of commercial host computers grew from 1.7 million to 2.4 million.

Today, with information so readily available, educators cannot afford to collect and transmit knowledge as if it were a static commodity. A new pedagogical orientation will be required to serve the kinds of students who go beyond simply gaining a set of skills and a body of knowledge. In this new model, professors must assume a new role -- that of a coach or guide who helps students process information and work collaboratively in groups. Tasks may vary among students, and students may sometimes direct their own learning and design their own

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projects. Professors must become facilitators, helping students to discover for themselves the power and efficacy of skills specific to critical thinking and problem solving. As Cox (1997), Frazier (1997), Boetcher (1997), Margolies (1991) and others have suggested, a college education should prepare students for new forms of experience beyond the campus. It should help them understand the complexity of that experience and should equip them with the ability to comprehend and negotiate that complexity. From this perspective, the goal of the new learning paradigm must be to help a generation of students become dynamic, life-long learners who can thrive in the emerging Information Age.

What opportunities and challenges face teacher preparation as we enter the 21st century? Traditionally, undergraduate students have been prepared for teacher certification during the course of their four-year baccalaureate degree. Now, in an effort to bring qualified people into the teaching profession, some states are offering degreed adults the opportunity to teach under emergency certification while taking courses designed to address teaching methodologies. This has meant that a first-year teacher would have to take courses at night, on weekends, or in the summer in order to fulfill these requirements. Can Web-based instruction offer a viable alternative to traditional campus-based classes? Will the quality of education be compromised, enhanced, or remain the same? What are the administrative and pedagogical issues that arise in the planning and implementation of these classes? Can Web-based courses be constructed so as to be engaging, motivating, and highly interactive? Do students feel they are well served? These are the questions that guide this study.

The Study

This study focuses on a Secondary Methods' block course for post-baccalaureate students seeking teacher certification. At this time the course is in progress and the findings of this study are a midpoint look. This course is being taught 80% asynchronously through the Internet and 20% synchronously in a classroom at a state university. The target population is composed of post-baccalaureate students who are employed under emergency certification in secondary school settings. The On-Line Secondary Methods block (hereafter called Methods On-Line) consists of four courses -- Classroom Management, Content Area Reading, Secondary Methods, and The Professional Educator -- framed into one integrated block focused on the issues and concerns of new teachers as well as the developmental processes of teaching. Students are taking these four courses concurrently over two semesters.

After an on-campus introductory class, the course was taught via course pages accessed through the Internet. Additional classes were scheduled for the mid-point and end-point of each semester. Assignments were posted on the Web and students read and posted their reading responses on the "forum" (electronic threaded message board). In addition, students participated in on-line simulations of classroom activities. These simulations were offered as problems posted on the "forum" for the class to respond to. Students also posted their reflections about their field experiences. Each student was required to create a personal home page in which they provided links to their papers, projects, and a Web-based resource list for teachers. This home page also served as an electronic portfolio.

In order to participate in the course, students were required to have Internet access to the World Wide Web. They were also required to enroll in all four courses over the course of the two semesters. They had to be employed in a secondary school under emergency certification.

Evaluations were based on successful completion of reading responses, participation in forum discussions, participation in classroom simulations, completion of field-based activities, completion of papers and projects, and the construction of a web page which served as an electronic portfolio.

Investigators for this project included the two professors of record for the course, and a university administrator. Informants for the study were the professors, the administrator, and the students.

Data sources for the study of the project included student products, transcripts of on-line discussions, field journals of professors, an administrator interview, and student on-line interviews.

Data was analyzed utilizing qualitative analysis strategies.

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in three distinct voices: the administrator (immediate supervisor) and the two professors. Students' voices will be part of the final study.

The Immediate Supervisor

Sam Houston State University (SHSU) like most other institutions of higher learning, is attempting to meet the diverse needs of students through technology based coursework. Jeannine Hirtle and Robin McGrew-Zoubi created a proposal to teach the secondary methods block of courses on-line for a special population -- post-baccalaureate certification only students with full time teaching responsibilities. As chairperson of the Language, Literacy, and Special Populations (LLSP) department and an instructor within the traditional secondary methods block, I was intrigued, but also concerned about quality of learning.

In the traditional program, three faculty members teach 9 of these 12 hours within the block. Field service in public school secondary classrooms is an integral part of the methods block. The courses are taught from 8:00 - 1:00 two mornings a week and field service is planned both during that time and some hours according to individual schedules worked out with mentor teachers in the public schools. Since this schedule is impossible for post-baccalaureate students teaching full time, the need for alternatives is great. The proposal submitted by Drs. Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi was very complete. The professors included a syllabus, which integrated the courses and specified a time line for meeting all learning objectives. Objectives were tied to the State proficiencies for teachers and to the domains for the State examination in secondary professional development, which all teacher education students must pass in order to become certified.

I met with the Chair of Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) and we agreed to support the proposal to offer these courses for graduate credit and to encourage Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi to share their proposal at the next joint LLSP / C&I faculty meeting. The reaction of other faculty members was a surprise. Several persons who teach technology related course questioned the expertise of these two faculty members to teach a technology-based course. Both Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi have done extensive professional development in the areas of Web-based courses and instructional uses of technology. Turf also became an issue. Faculty members who teach the courses in the traditional program questioned if two instructors could effectively teach the four courses in the integrated plan described in the proposal. Discussion was open and lively and I stressed my belief that individual instructors don't own courses and that I felt Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi were very qualified to teach the block.

The next hurdles were the registration procedures and entrance requirements. Most post-baccalaureate students are on emergency permits with local school districts. Methods On-Line involved taking four graduate-level courses. Although the content would be integrated, students needed to register for two courses in the fall and two courses in the spring. At SHSU, post-baccalaureate certification students who apply for the graduate program may only take 6 hours prior to providing the university with Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores. Most of the students interested in the Methods On-Line were not planning to get a master's degree at this time. Registration can be accomplished by computer or telephone once a graduate application had been filed, but these procedures created roadblocks for some students. Students did not always have access to registration and payment deadline dates. Drs. Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi spent many hours acclimating the Methods On-Line students to the university.

Once the class was established I began logging on regularly to observe the activities and student progress. I have had minimal training in Web-based courses, so I was interested in learning the process. Since I teach the Content Area Reading and Writing in the traditional block, I especially enjoyed noting the differences in assignments and activities. Each Methods On-Line student was teaching and had access to the classroom. Many of the assignments could be tailored to meet the immediate needs of these teachers. I have actually had the students in my traditional Content Area Reading classes use the resources from the Methods On-Line for several assignments. The policy of establishing forums for continuous student responses -- not only to the instructors' assignments, but also to each other's products -- provided opportunities similar to class discussion

activities in the traditional classroom. I have noted that students make a response and then move on to another assignment. Drs. Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi, in their responses to student work and comments, encouraged students to return to earlier forums and read other's comments. At the end of the semester, all on-line conversations can be evaluated for growth in understanding and insight. The assignments were very similar to those in the traditional block courses, but the students in the on-line course were moving at a faster pace. With the course workload and the full-time teaching, I wonder if there was time for reflection and assimilation. I hope the teachers from schools in close proximity are meeting together and discussing assignments and teaching activities. I think it would be worthwhile to add this component. These teachers need the support of colleagues and mentors. Surveying the Methods On-Line students to determine their perceptions of support from other students and faculty would be a good idea at the end of the first semester.

My biggest concern is with the time required of Drs. Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi. They are spending many hours on-line, constructing assignments or responding to forums. I think they need to document the time and activities and compare them with the preparation and grading time of the traditional block. Possibly, once the course is established, this concern would be less. This time on-line also reduces the interaction Hirtle and McGrew-Zoubi have with other faculty members. As a result, few faculty or administrators are aware of the innovative teaching or the demands of these on-line courses. I hope faculty will support the efforts of these two faculty members; however, they must find time and ways to share their experiences with colleagues. At this point, I support the on-line course for the post-baccalaureate, certification-only students. I will try to get more faculty interested and involved in the project, and finally, I will look closely at examination scores for the State certification exam. If these students prove to be adequately prepared, the Methods On-Line will have met a great need for our non-traditional students.

The Professors

The creation of a Methods On-Line course posed a number of unique challenges. After our initial proposal was accepted, one of the first problems we faced was how to recruit for the course. We created a brochure that advertised the course and sent it out via the local Education Services Center's distribution route. We conducted phone interviews with students who called in response. During these interviews we explained the course concept, explained the criteria, reviewed our university's admission policy for post-baccalaureate students, and emphasized the necessity that the students have access to the Internet as well as basic computer literacy skills.

Students who wished to be part of the on-line course had to agree to participate in all four courses. One student wished to participate and had completed two of the courses. These two courses were "on the books" administratively, and therefore, this student did not have to pay tuition. Because she did not pay tuition, she did not have a university computer account and that prevented her from participating in the university-managed on-line message board. We had to contact the Director of Computer Services for a temporary account, but it caused a delay in posting her lesson responses.

Financial aid also posed challenges for our students. Students who were on financial aid needed to receive grades each semester in order to maintain their aid and qualify for additional aid in the next semester. Because our course was organized to run over the course of two semesters, we arranged to give students incompletes after the fall semester with the understanding that they would receive credit for four courses at the end of the second semester. We had to receive special permission from the financial aid officer to have these students continue to receive aid.

Technology was a special challenge to many students. The technical expertise of our students was extremely diverse and not all students had the Internet access they thought they had. Some students were relying on school networks and could not maintain consistent access on these systems. Many did not know how to receive and send e-mail or access the web. Other students had privacy issues concerning receiving e-mail because they used a common faculty account at their school. Some students could send e-mail, but could not set the preferences to reveal their identity, so we occasionally received unsigned email from defaultuser@domain.com. We received one frantic call from two students who said Netscape was not accepting any new customers.

We also had problems with students accessing the threaded message boards we used for class discussion. These message boards, called "forums," required a login and password. Our students went into login and password

overload. They had to learn one login and password to access their Internet provider, another to access their e-mail, another to access their university computer account, and still another for the threaded message board. Our students were thoroughly confused and it took weeks to sort all this out. We received many frantic phone calls from students who were trying unsuccessfully to post assignments.

Because of the time constraints involved in creating this uniquely formatted program, we each took responsibility for designing, posting, interacting with students, and assessing a lesson each week. Hirtle took the odd weeks and McGrew-Zoubi took the even weeks. The common denominator that guided our decisions about what topics would be taught was the guiding question, "What will it take for this teacher to best survive and thrive as a first year teacher." Our lesson topics included questions such as: How do I get off to a good start in my classroom? How do I know what students are supposed to learn? How do I plan an effective lesson? What part does assessment play in learning?

Additional questions can be found at http://www.shsu.edu/~edu_jsh/schedule.html.

Lesson Design

Dr. McGrew-Zoubi: Lesson design was a lot like writing lesson plans for someone else to use. All the instructions had to be very concrete and literal and I had to pay special attention to the sequence in which I stated things.

Classroom Management is all about broadening perspectives. Reading a passage, considering our own experience with the topic, and then looking at other students' perspectives made discussion critical for the success of the lessons. This fall we spent a lot of time on cultural norms for behavior. The way students are raised and the environments from which they come affect the way they think things should occur at school. In discussion, they clarified their perspectives in the context of discussing effective schools and best practices. Interactive discussions helped them hone what was important to practice, and define why it was important. Everyone became an active participant. Because of the course requirements, participation was mandatory. The quieter students who might have held back in a traditional class discussion reported they felt freer to reveal their thoughts on the forum. Some reported that they had time to compose their thoughts before they said them, and this helped them take the opportunity to be heard.

The following discussion excerpt includes a posting from a student whose spontaneous contributions centered on her inability to use technology efficiently and the problems that she had in submitting her work. In this response to the forum, she focused her responses on the discussion topic, making it possible for her to enter the conversation without the inclusion of caveats and disclaimers as to how she entered.

At risk at my school means students are "at risk" of failing or dropping out. . . We have a huge problem at our school - teen pregnancy. Of about one hundred students, seven are pregnant right now and five already have a child. If you consider that half of our students are girls that makes the statistic 24%! . . . I know that teenage mothers are at risk of dropping out, so shouldn't our focus be on the ones who aren't pregnant yet? I know that sex education is "risky" business but these kids are busy educating themselves. I have been working on a plan to help educate these students. The idea was born last year when one of my best students came up pregnant. We have a new administration now ... I feel that teachers who are always on the lookout to "bust" them for every little thing are very discouraging to them. They start to feel like they can't do anything right so why try. I try to focus on the good things. . . One child saved is worth all you had to do to save them.

In this exchange she had six responses, all endorsing her efforts to make positive and meaningful changes to benefit her students. This type of response is often lost in a face-to-face discussion. Support and affirmation can be lost in the intensity of the discussion.

Assessment became a matter of recording the fact that the students posted thoughtfully, reflectively, and meaningfully to the professor and colleagues. Without the forum, this critical pedagogical strategy of whole class discussion would have been impossible. Engaging in multiple responses that are posted for the duration of the course helped create a community of learners who were continually growing through dialogue.

Dr. Hirtle: Many of my early lessons were formatted to provide students opportunities to engage in what they were reading about. For example, Content Area Reading students are instructed to activate student schema through a variety of strategies. I asked students to complete an anticipation guide before they read chapters and to post their responses in a reaction guide afterward. If they were reading a chapter on writing lesson objectives, I clearly posted the lesson objectives for this on-line lesson to model the technique. Their activity for this lesson was an application of what they read. If the lesson was about communicating instructional intent clearly, students created lesson objectives and posted these to the appropriate forum

Students posted the activities they created to the forums and responded to each other. I created rubrics to evaluate these activities and after evaluating students, e-mailed those rubrics because I did not want to publicly post a grade. Sometimes, this created problems because our school e-mail server went down and grade reports got lost in the mail.

One of the biggest problems I faced was creating too much for students to do. Our colleagues were suspect as to how well a methods course could be taught on-line because so much modeling and interaction are required to make the course successful. In an effort to create that environment in a virtual sense, I filled my lessons with opportunities to respond in forums, activities to participate in, and projects to create. When I met my students face-to-face at mid-semester, there was general concern about the workload and about their abilities to meet the demands of the course and their jobs. Dr. Zoubi and I honestly laid out our objectives, the concerns of our colleagues, and our concerns about adequately preparing the students for the certification exams. We then solicited input from the students about how we could best satisfy those demands and make the course more manageable for them. Tension dispelled as we had this dialogue, and I streamlined my lessons.

Assessment was another big issue we faced. How would we provide regular feedback to students and allow them the opportunity to grow from that feedback? Both Dr. Zoubi and I set a policy that if students were dissatisfied with a grade, they could redo the assignment within a reasonable time frame, until they are satisfied with the product. We would provide feedback and then set a deadline on resubmission. Most of our students did resubmit and we adjusted the grades. We sent grades through an electronic gradebook program with an e-mail and progress report feature. While both Dr. Zoubi and I prefer to give qualitative assessment, we did assign number grades to student work, and students seemed to take comfort in the quantitative reporting of their progress. They responded quickly to question marks, incompletes, and zeroes in their assignments, often admitting that they simply overlooked an assignment. We found it important that on-line assessment come regularly, in quick response to the work, and that instruction is influenced as a result.

Conclusion

Methods On-Line and this study are a work in progress. We are continuously reflecting on and adjusting our practice to align to our evolving theory bases, and we look forward to publishing the conclusion to this study after the completion of the course after the end of the 1999 Spring semester.

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